



*“THE PLAN WAS TO DROP A LARGE BOMB WITH A DELAYED FUSE INTO THE MOUTH OF A RAILROAD TUNNEL.”*

# TUNNEL BUSTING IN KOREA



By Cdr. K. W. "Tex" Atkinson, USN (Ret.)

There is an old axiom among salesmen that states: "Nothing happens until somebody takes an application." Good ideas sometimes remain dormant unless they are "sold" to those who can put thoughts into action. Thus, to say that Lieutenant Frank Metzner was a good salesman is to pay him a sincere compliment.

A WW II reserve pilot recalled for Korea, Frank was in civilian life a writer and radio announcer—a communicator of ideas. From this relatively safe environment, Frank transitioned into Officer in Charge of a Composite Squadron (VC) 35 detachment aboard *Princeton* (CV 37).

By early 1951, the Korean War had progressed from a retreat by United Nations forces from the 38th parallel to a foothold along the Pusan perimeter, to General Douglas MacArthur's highly successful Inchon invasion—only to be followed by hundreds of thousands of Chinese troops storming south from Manchuria. The 38th parallel again became the focal point for a bitterly fought struggle. The objective was to stop the flow of supplies from Manchuria to Chinese and North Korean troops amassed along a battle line in central Korea.

During daylight hours, the pilots of Carrier Air Group 19 were busy knocking out railroad and highway bridges. They also strafed and rocketed truck convoys and trainloads of supplies that moved along narrow roads and rail lines through snow-covered mountains and frozen valleys. Under the cover of darkness, supplies were moved south by train, truck, ox cart and backpack. At the same time, hundreds of North Korean and Chinese workers were busy laying rail lines over frozen riverbeds where large steel bridges had been bombed the day before.

VC-35's mission was night interdiction. Using eyesight and radar, Lt. Metzner and his pilots searched in darkness. When they located a moving string of lights, they lit up the sky with tracers, rockets and exploding bombs. At first light one morning, VC-35 pilots spotted several trains in succession making a dash for the mouth of the nearest tunnel. Frank and his AD-4N *Skyraider* aircrews waited, but the trains did not emerge from the other side of the mountain. After returning to the carrier and discussing their experience, the VC-35 pilots came up with an idea that could stop the enemy's supply

Opposite, *NA*News Art Director Morgan Wilbur put brush to canvas to illustrate Cdr. Tex Atkinson's words describing the VA-195 pilot's mission as a tunnel buster.

trains in their tracks.

As officer in charge, Lt. Metzner had the job of selling the idea to Rear Admiral Ralph Ofstie, Commander Task Force 77, flying his flag aboard *Princeton*. The plan was to drop a large bomb with a delayed fuse into the mouth of a railroad tunnel. Although the concept was simple enough, the admiral was skeptical. First, the bombing aircraft would have to come in low and slow, right on the ground, and would be a sitting duck for guns placed near the tunnel's entrance. Second, the largest of the North Korean tunnels was only 17 feet wide, and it was doubtful that such accuracy could be achieved with consistency.

Frank Metzner was ready with a plan. Four F4U *Corsairs* would lead every run, strafing the hills surrounding the mouth of the tunnel. Only ADs would be used for bombing. They could carry up to three 2,000-pound bombs using inboard wing and centerline racks, and they had sufficient power to clear the mountain after the drop. Most important, they were a very stable bombing platform. As to accuracy and consistency, a test of the concept would provide the answer. The admiral gave Frank the OK to "give it a try."

I first learned of the project when Attack Squadron (VA) 195 pilots were told the basic idea and asked to write their thoughts on how it should be done. We submitted our recommendations and then flew a test strike to see if our concept would work. Most of us came up with the same conclusion: fly low along the tracks leading to the tunnel's entrance, then release in time to clear the mountain.

On our first hops we dropped too soon and too fast, causing the bombs to hit short. We soon learned that flaps were needed. The result was a wheels-up carrier landing

approach. Using this technique, we were able to approach the target smoothly and practically fly the bomb into the mouth of the tunnel.

Soon our squadron executive officer, whose wing I had flown for more than a year, told me that I would be flying with VC-35 for a while—as a tunnel buster.

From March until May 1951, VC-35 and VA-195 pilots flew many tunnel strikes. Most of my flights were with Lt. Atlee Clapp,



**Cdr. Tex Atkinson during the Korean War.**

who led our division of four ADs. He was the first of us to put a bomb inside a tunnel. The explosion drove dirt and debris out the other side so far that from our ringside seat, the result appeared to be the world's largest cannon shot.

After 50 years, I still have vivid memories of our tunnel experiences. I recall one day when a runaway train suddenly came speeding out the end of a tunnel after a bomb exploded inside. We chased the train, strafing away before someone took the time to check forward a few miles and told us to hold up. The empty locomotive was speeding toward a rail yard, so we pulled up, relaxed

and watched one of the most spectacular train crashes you could hope to see. Locomotives and boxcars flew in all directions, and when the dust settled we went to our next tunnel.

By this time we were putting nearly 50 percent of our bombs into our targets. A flight of four ADs carrying 12 bombs, with four F4Us from Fighter Squadrons 192 and 193 flying cover, could expect to knock out two or three tunnels during one four-hour mission. The *Corsairs* kept any antiaircraft fire in check. There was only occasional damage to an AD or F4U—and no fatalities.

Tunnel busting wouldn't work today. In most war zones, it would be suicide. But it worked in 1951 and could have been used more extensively. Battle reports from the era contain little discussion of tunnel busting, and no valid explanation as to why the flights were terminated.

As for Frank Metzner, after our return stateside he published a feature article in *The Saturday Evening Post* titled, "I Fly the Night Skyraider." Frank was killed a few years later while flying a summer orientation flight with a Naval Academy midshipman in Corpus Christi, Texas. The wings came off their SNJ *Texan* during a loop. When I heard the story I recalled a day when Frank and several other pilots from our tunnel-busting team were in the ready room watching films from F6F *Hellcat* drones that were attempting to do a job similar to ours. The drone had a forward-facing camera. Equipment in the controlling aircraft recorded the picture as the drone, loaded with a 500-pound bomb, flew to the target.

When the F6F rolled in and pointed toward the target, all looked normal. As the drone got lower, those of us viewing in the darkened ready room sensed we



Above, an aerial view of a rail line entering the mouth of a tunnel. Left, *Princeton* (CV 37) steams off the Korean coast. Below, aviation ordnancemen J. V. Lykins and D. F. Jenkins move two truckloads of bombs onto *Princeton*'s bomb elevator for the trip to the flight deck and loading aboard waiting aircraft. Over 100 tons of ammunition were loaded and flown from the carrier each operational day.

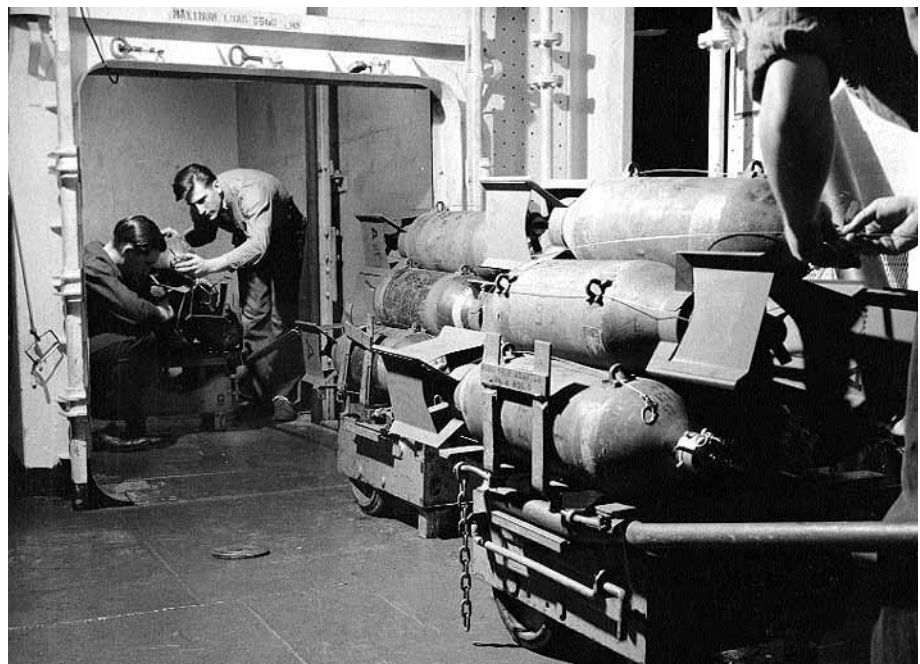
were flying, watching the target get closer and closer. Then, as the F6F dove below 1,000 feet, the ground appeared dangerously close. When the drone passed 500 feet, the target suddenly jumped up and popped us in the face. The lights came on and everyone in the room was in a cold sweat. No living pilot had ever seen what we just saw, except on film.

I wish I could have spoken to Frank during those last few seconds near Corpus Christi, as he watched a live replay of that 1951 day in the ready room aboard *Princeton*. I would have told him: "Frank, you did good! Your abilities saved the lives of many a soldier who otherwise would have been buried in the dirt, in the snow and ice, and in the freezing waters of Korea."

Frank Metzner's skill in "selling" the tunnel-busting concept helped stop the delivery of tons of enemy ammunition. Some of those tons would have found their targets.

## Epilogue

Recently, my wife and I traveled



to Seattle, Wash., to visit our son, a chef at one of the city's restaurants. Our waitress was Asian, and toward the end of the meal she came to our table and addressed me in a quiet voice:

"Mr. Atkinson, I wish to thank you most sincerely for fighting to save my country."

I looked into her face and saw nothing but sincerity. I tried to say "Thank you" with as much control as I could, but suddenly my voice

wasn't working well.

Later, my son told me that she was 22 years old and was from South Korea. She was born more than 25 years after the beginning of the Korean War.

I pass her thanks along.

Cdr. Atkinson is currently writing a book on naval air in the Korean War.

